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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning, or learning by doing, fits newer conceptions about the process of learning. John Dewey's emphasis on experience as the key to real learning, Paulo Freire's criticism of the "banking concept" of education, and David Kolb's description of the cycle of experiential learning have changed the conception of learning. This paper discusses the General Education program at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, which is built around a four-course interdisciplinary humanities sequence which claims as its signature a faculty teaching circle on experiential learning. The paper explains that each week all faculty teaching in sections of a particular humanities course meet to discuss the upcoming lecture and readings and plan strategies to teach the significant concepts--the circle grew out of a desire to examine and change the learning environment so that students could become more actively engaged in discussing ideas, reading texts, and forming new concepts. The paper describes the teaching circle: how it was organized, its activities; its goals for experiential learning, and the use of experiential teaching strategies. It finds that this teaching circle led its participants to reflect about how educators teach and what it means for students and teachers. (Contains a 6-item bibliography. An assignment is appended.) (NKA)

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Experiential Learning in a Humanities Class

Paper presented at Challenge and Response: Rethinking Key Issues
in College Learning
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The General Education program at UNCA is built around a four-course interdisciplinary humanities sequence. Courses are organized chronologically, beginning with a focus on the ancient world and ending with contemporary social issues and problems. Each course has a similar structure: large group lecture followed by two small class sections for discussion each week. Instructional strategies tend to be lecture, close reading of texts, and interactive discussion. Each week all faculty teaching in sections of a particular humanities course meet to discuss the upcoming lecture and readings and plan strategies to teach the significant concepts. In these discussions faculty described frustration over the students' lack of response to the texts and concepts. This faculty teaching circle on experiential learning grew out of a desire to examine and change the learning environment so that students could become more actively engaged in discussing ideas, reading texts, and forming new concepts.

Why Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning, or learning by doing, fits newer conceptions about the process of

CS 510 687

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learning. Dewey's emphasis on experience as the key to real learning, Freire's criticism of the "banking concept" of education, and Kolb's description of the cycle of experiential learning have changed the conception of learning. It is not enough for teachers to simply convey information in a behaviorist model of stimulus and response. Learners are not passive vessels; they are persons with experiences and past knowledge which they use to transact with ideas and create meaning. Experiential learning, according to Kolb, requires experiences for the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations. The natural cycle of learning moves from concrete experiences to reflection to formation of concepts and generalizations to testing these concepts in new situations. Reflection is an essential element in learning, following a concrete experience, as the experience in itself may not lead to the formation of new ideas. So dynamic learning requires that teachers draw on students' background information, build knowledge which is needed to develop new concepts by offering experiences, guide students in experiences in which they can create new knowledge, and provide a structure for reflection.

Organizing Our Teaching Circle

The teaching circle was planned as a week-long intensive discussion of experiential learning theory by a group of faculty who taught the same course, The Modern World. The group would discuss models of learning, read books and articles about experiential learning, and then review the contents of the course to design activities to involve students in experiences and reflection. Since we wanted to make this an intensive and reflective time when other duties did not intervene, the circle convened in the summer, shortly after the end of the spring semester.

We began by reading John Dewey's 1938 essay, Experience and Education, in which Dewey explains that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual

experience and education" (p. 20). According to Dewey, experience "arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes" (p. 38) which can be the "moving force" which leads to learning. Experience also changes the person. He says, "...every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences" (p. 35). So experience has a cumulative effect, causing a person's growth as she interacts and reacts to new experiences. Dewey points out that there are good and bad experiences. Traditional teaching itself is actually an experience. Dewey says teachers must consider the quality of the experiences. Effective experiences are ones students want to do; they are pleasurable. They also influence the way they will think and act in later experiences (p. 27). Dewey says, teachers should " utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building experiences that are worth while" (p. 40).

Goals for Experiential Learning

Using our reading and discussion of Dewey's ideas, we talked about ways to engage students in active learning, to expand what goes on in our discussion sections and the large group lectures. Eventually we established four main goals for experiential learning in our humanities classes. Experiential learning should draw on concrete and relevant examples and experiences; require students to make choices; promote students' interactions with each other, with the teacher, and with the materials of the course; and promote reflection.

Next we read Ira Shor's <u>When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy</u> (1996) which led us to examine classroom environment in our humanities course. Shor describes how most traditional classes are set up so that the teacher is in control of the content

and students' experiences are not considered fundamental to the learning that will take place within the course. However, when Shor teaches a course on Utopia he begins with "a pedagogy of questions" (Freire and Faundez 1989). At the first class meeting, in addition to general information questions, Shor asks students: "What does 'Utopia' mean to you?" and "What questions do you have about 'Utopia'?" (p. 39). He then asks students to read their comments in small groups and then to the whole class, establishing the importance of dialogue between students and the idea that discussion does not have to reach a consensus.

Shor tries to enter into a problem posing dialogue with students right at the beginning of the course. He "begins with questions for writing and discussion, in which I restrain my authoritative academic voice by saying as little as necessary in the early going, so that I can listen to as much student expression as possible, from which I draw out further problems to pose and into which I eventually backload my own commentary" (p. 41). This is a fundamental shift in orientation. The teacher here is trying to follow the students' lead rather than making the students follow the teacher. This doesn't mean Shor abnegates his role as teacher. Instead he changes where he provides information so that students have the opportunity to draw on and reflect about their experiences and what they mean. Students are given a chance to create the context for learning a new concept. Shor calls this "backloaded teacher commentary." By backloading what he wants to teach, Shor believes he gives students "a chance to articulate their positions" (p. 41). Teaching then becomes a dialogue of learners, not a didactic rhetorical stance of the teacher.

As we read Shor, we began to ask questions about our assumptions as teachers. We talked about how well we understand the students we teach. One professor asked how often we consider what students want from a college education, what are their goals, what expectations do

they bring to the teaching/learning relationship. Another member of the group asked what parts of the humanities course content are negotiable. Could we offer more choices of readings or more opportunities for students to talk about their understandings of an idea before we give our explanations? How could we implement experiential strategies in our courses without overburdening the course, the students, or the teacher? How could we give up control and still guide students' discussion so they could draw on their background knowledge?

Experiential Teaching Strategies

We discussed these readings against our knowledge that the common methods used in humanities are close reading of texts, making connections between ideas and actions or ideas and institutions, and creating an environment of inquisitive observation. We began to identify teaching strategies which would merge the experiential model with our common methods. Our teaching might utilize four strategies: getting students to draw on their background knowledge; creating opportunities for students to engage in actual experiences--such as attending cultural events, listening to music, role-playing; using simulations to create experiences in the classroom; and expanding students' interactions with each other so that the interactions within the classroom would become an experience.

We discussed whether we could use Shor's model of backloading teacher information. In the Modern World course we are teaching concepts about human nature, progress, political interactions. What if we started the course by asking students what they know about human nature or the idea of the relationship between people and government? We could begin the course by asking students to describe a personal encounter with government. What happened? Where they required to do something that they didn't want to do? How did they feel? Do they

wish they didn't have to do this thing? What did they feel afterwards? Was the end result positive or negative? Is it necessary to have government? Would people know what they should do without government? What makes governments necessary?

Students' responses and discussion of these ideas could become a touchstone by which to measure the readings and lectures in the course. Throughout the course we could return to their initial ideas and see if they wanted to change their responses on the basis of what they have learned or read. Students could describe how or why their ideas may be changing or why they aren't changing. This type of open-ended questioning, based on student experiences, would not only draw on students' experiences but would also make the act of reading and discussing an experience for the students.

Other classroom experiences which teachers could use to create reflective learning included simulations, role playing, guided film viewing, and prereading strategies that would get students to read actively. An example of an assignment designed to engage students in problem solving and reflection is offered in the appendix.

This teaching circle led us to reflect about how we teach and what it means. As we talked throughout the week, we kept coming back to the question of why we should teach experientially. Again and again our answer had to do with how experiential learning changes the dynamic of the relationship between teachers and students. In an experiential model, the teacher is no longer considered the only expert in the classroom. Student experiences are significant. When this is acknowledged both teachers and students have to change their attitude towards the class. What happens in the class depends on the input and participation of both students and teachers. Students can begin to require as much from each other as they want from the teacher. This could

lead to exciting possibilities where everyone in the class is engaged in learning. This teaching circle was our first step in this direction.

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Appendix 1
HUMANITIES 324 ART GALLERY EXHIBIT ASSIGNMENT

This semester we will be exploring several major periods of art history. In order to facilitate understanding and knowledge of the development of artistic movements, you will participate in a group project to design a gallery exhibit for a particular type of art, a particular artist, or a significant movement in art history.

This will be a virtual exhibit which you will "display" in our classroom. Once groups are formed, dates will be assigned to coincide with the appropriate day for discussion of the particular artist or art movement.

You can choose the display mode--slides, CD Rom projection, overheads, computer display, video, color copies of paintings--which fits with your plan and the expertise of your group. You must ensure that all members of the class can clearly see the art. You must secure the appropriate equipment for the date of your exhibit from LRC, with one week advance notice.

As curators of the exhibit, you will choose the works for the exhibit, create appropriate informational displays for "visitors," and create an inviting atmosphere. In the guide you prepare for this exhibit, explain why you chose the paintings or works which you included in the exhibit. Also include a bibliography of resources which you studied as you prepared the exhibit.

Steps in this process:

1. Meet with group members to decide on roles, assign research and "acquisition of art works."
2. Gather resources that give you information about the artistic movement and conduct research.
3. Choose paintings that best exhibit this type of art.
4. Assemble the collection of paintings and works of art.
5. Write the instructive, descriptive, or explanatory copy for the exhibit.
6. Plan and design the exhibit.

Exhibits:

1. Rococo art and artists
2. Neoclassical Portraits
3. Chardin and Greuze--paintings of everyday life in the eighteenth century
4. Romantic Art: Goya, Delacroix, Turner
5. Modern Women artists of the 18th or 19th centuries
6. Depiction of the female in Impressionist art of the 19th century
7. Cubism
8. Artists of the Harlem Renaissance
9. Expressionism